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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 004092

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SUBJECT: SYRIANS DO A LITTLE DAMAGE CONTROL ON BASHAR
SPEECH, AMID NEGATIVE REACTION EVEN AT HOME

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission, William Roebuck, per 1.4
b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Political and economic contacts in Damascus have largely written off the August 15 speech of President Bashar al-Asad as ill-timed and reflecting the young Syrian leader's inexperience and lack of political judgment. The speech has prompted renewed personal criticism of Bashar that had subsided in the past six months. Popular reaction to the speech, while harder to gauge, has been more positive. Recognizing that there was a need for damage control, the regime has used FM Mu'allim and Minister of Information Mohsen Bilal to argue that the speech had been misunderstood and that Asad had not intended to criticize, even implicitly, fellow Arab leaders. Despite momentary criticism the speech has stirred up -- together with the damage control currently underway -- the regime is unlikely to have many serious second thoughts. Asad seems to feel vindicated with his hard-line policy on Lebanon, his support for Hizballah, and his alliance with Iran. End Summary.

¶2. (C) SPEECH SEEN AS TOO HARSH: The consensus among political and economic contacts in Damascus is that President Bashar al-Asad's strident August 15 speech was poorly timed, misconceived, and, a failure. No one we spoke with liked the speech or saw anything positive in it. (Comment: Popular reaction to the speech, while harder to gauge, has been somewhat more positive, with some Syrians endorsing what they understood to be Asad's criticisms of Arab leaders as "sellouts", and applauding Asad for his responding with passion to the high numbers of civilian casualties in Lebanon.) Prominent attorney Jacques Hakim told A/DCM the speech was "stupid and unbelievable." Dr. Samir al-Taki, an advisor at the MFA and a protege of FM Walid Mu'allim, said it succeeded in deepening Syria's isolation at a time when it was possible that diplomatic doors could have opened up. Al-Taki mentioned the canceled visit of German FM Steinmeier to make his point. The speech also damaged critical relationships with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, added al-Taki.

¶3. (C) WRITTEN BY A "GANG OF FIVE": Hakim insisted that the speech was "written by the Mukhabarrat." Elaborating on the same point, al-Taki asserted that the "quartet" of SMI chief Asif Shawkat, Ba'ath National Security Bureau head Hisham Ikhtiyar, VP Farouk a-Shara'a, and Ba'ath Party DepSYG Mohammed Saeed Bukhaytan had dominated the tone of the speech just as they were dominating all other critical elements of foreign and domestic policy. Al-Taki suspected that VP advisor (and former senior intelligence officer) Mohammed

Nassif Khairbek was at present offering support for the hard-line views espoused by Asad in the speech.

¶4. (C) BASHAR-BASHING STARTS UP AGAIN: The speech has provoked significant amounts of quiet anti-Bashar criticism, which had subsided over the past six months. Several contacts made the point that Bashar's father would never have made such an ill-conceived speech. Al-Taki likened the rhetoric in the speech to the excesses of Ba'athist ideology that had been evident in Syria before Hafez al-Asad took power. The criticisms of Bashar as inexperienced, prone to taking bad advice, making decisions that deepened Syria's isolation and squandered its assets, have all been voiced (privately) with renewed vigor in the wake of the speech. People have also noted that Asad made himself look "silly" by saying nothing during the crisis and making sure Syria stayed completely out of the fighting, but then using his speech to try to take some credit for Hizballah's "victory."

¶5. (C) Kurdish human rights lawyer and Yekiti Party member Faisal Badr said that he had not been surprised at Asad's aggressive tone, calling it a reflection of the Syrian President's disappointment and frustration at not being included in negotiations regarding Lebanon. The tone also reflected Syrian and Iranian crowing after Hizballah's victory, although in Badr's view, Syria is the weak link in the Iran-Hizballah-Syria chain.

¶6. (C) BUSINESSMEN FEARFUL OF CONSEQUENCES: Imad Ghreiwati, president of the Damascus Chambers of Industry, commented to us that he was against the confrontational tone and stance taken by President Asad in his August 15 speech. Ghreiwati's criticism was echoed by others in the Damascene

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business community we talked to in the last week. Firas Azem, general manager of one of the three new private insurance companies, was more pointed in his criticism and more obviously concerned with how Asad's sharpened rhetoric, if pursued, could translate into increased isolation and a degraded investment climate. Nejeeb Bazari, managing director of Bazari Enterprises, opined that Asad lost support in the business community because of his speech as businessmen like himself that had been generally supportive of the SARG stance during the conflict would not now agree with gratuitously pursuing further confrontation. Bader Shallah, scion of one of the leading Sunni business families, was less directly critical of Asad but equally anxious for the SARG to lower its rhetoric now that hostilities in Lebanon had ended.

¶7. (C) SOME DAMAGE CONTROL EVIDENT: Recognizing apparently that there was a need for damage control, the regime has trotted out FM Mu'allim and Minister of Information Mohsen Bilal to make soothing noises and provide some less negative spin for the speech. Mu'allim was quoted in an interview August 19 as saying that Asad was not referring to Arab leaders -- contrary to the general impression at the time -- when he criticized as "half men" those who did not support Hizballah in its fight against Israel. Bilal referred to speech as "a reproach among brothers . . . at a time of crisis" and emphasized that Syria enjoyed "brotherly" relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Despite recurring expectations that he would use a particular speech to reach out to an international audience and try to position himself as a moderate and consensus builder, Bashar al-Asad has often struck a harsh, defiant tone, especially in speeches that have focused on Lebanon. His mid-November 2005 speech at the University of Damascus, as well as one delivered the year before to a group of Syrian expatriates, for example, came off as unexpectedly strident. The common thread in these and other bellicose Asad speeches is Lebanon. Since the passage of UNSCR 1559, the regime has been fixated on preventing Lebanon from slipping completely out of Syria's clutches and

on undermining efforts by PM Siniora and the March 14 group to inch away from that long-standing Syrian embrace. Despite momentary criticism the speech has stirred up here and in the region -- together with the temporary damage control currently underway -- the regime is unlikely to have many serious second thoughts about continued confrontation, bolstered as it is by Hizballah,s positive showing in the fighting and now in the reconstruction aftermath. Asad seems to feel vindicated with his hard-line policy on Lebanon, his support for Hizballah, and his alliance with Iran, and to believe that events and political developments in Lebanon have proven -- and will continue to prove -- him right.

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